9.1. Livelihood and Conservation in Little Rann of Kachchh: A Summary

‘… the other day a wandering tourist asked an Agaria if he could show him the way leading to the sanctuary, the Agaria replied that he did not know the way to the sanctuary, however he could take him to his Rann …’. This statement by an NGO professional brings to fore various facets of the livelihood and conservation debate. To conclude this description, an attempt will be made in this chapter to summarise the major issues which have emerged in the context of this debate and the positions of different stakeholders to these issues.

Agarias of LRK are convinced that they share a relationship of peaceful co-existence with the Rann and its creatures. Their association with the Rann expressed through customs, beliefs, stories and songs emphasise on this age old linkage. They maintain that their livelihood activity of salt production does not harm the biodiversity of Rann. This is also the view of NGO professionals working with the community.

Conservationists, on the contrary hold the opinion that all anthropogenic activities inside the Rann, including the activity of salt production is detrimental to its fragile ecosystem. Conservationists are firm in their belief that the success of conservation initiatives can only lead to a shining future for Agarias and other communities involved in similar park and people conflicts across the country. While conservationists stress upon the need to fence the entire area from all human activities except regulated tourism activities, Agarias consider their annual migration to Rann for salt production as their right. In view of the experiential knowledge possessed by them about the Rann and creatures inside it, Agarias opine that they should have control over the area and its resources rather than the forest officials. The findings of this study support the assertions of the community that their voices have not been incorporated in the strategies to protect the Rann by the conservationists. The relationship between Agarias and conservationists vis-à-vis the Rann is shown in Figure 9.1. Einarsson (1993) has aptly pointed out that conflicts concerning conservation involve disagreement between locals and conservationists regarding the manner in which a resource should be used.
Figure 9.1: Relationship between Agarias of LRK and Conservationists
He has termed such conflicts arising out of differences in assumptions on resource use as ‘culture conflicts’ and has added that in view of the skewed power relationship among conflicting parties, the ‘cultural superpowers’ can force their ethnocentric assumptions on other cultures (p.79).

The assessment of the natural resource dependent livelihood of Agarias based on the simplified SLF shows that the decline in brine levels inside LRK leading to a decrease in inland salt production and the fall in nation-wide demand for salt produced in LRK shape the economic vulnerability context of the community. These are also the major issues pertaining to livelihood of the community encountered during the period of fieldwork. The shift to mechanised extraction of brine from manual process by 1980s and the period of flourishing inland salt trade before the current slump in the market are major events in the timeline depicting the important developments related to inland salt production. The conflict with conservationists over the issue of WAS is also a key determinant of the contours of the vulnerability context. Emanating from the notification of the Rann as a sanctuary, the non-renewal of leases inside LRK, notices given to Agarias to stop salt production and the recent rejection of claims of most individual Agarias to LRK in the survey and settlement report of WAS have heightened the vulnerability of the community. The area has also witnessed heightened government and NGO efforts to protect the biodiversity of LRK since the late nineties. Figure 9.2 shows the major issues in the context of the debate prior to and during the period of fieldwork.

The impact of these issues leading to the vulnerability of the community can be seen on the livelihood assets pentagon. The findings of this study point towards a shrinkage in the natural, financial and social capital vertices of the pentagon in the context of Agarias of LRK. It can be inferred that vulnerability in the domains of financial and social capital of Agarias is directly correlated to the availability of and accessibility to natural capital. These domains are further impacted by the fall in the market share of inland salt.
Chapter 9

Figure 9.2: Issues Pertaining to Livelihood and Conservation in LRK

Prior to the Period of Fieldwork

- Manual Production of Inland Salt
- Decrease in Number of Wild Asses
- Mechanisation of Inland Salt Production
- Notification of Wild Ass Sanctuary
- Increase in Inland Salt Production
- Increase in Number of Wild Asses

During the Period of Fieldwork

- Decline in Brine Levels inside LRK
- Decrease in Inland Salt Production
- Fall in Demand for Inland Salt Produced in LRK
- Increased Efforts to Improve Lives of Agarias
- Increased Efforts to Protect the Wild Asses
- Non-Renewal of Leases inside LRK for Salt Production
- Notices to Agarias to Stop Inland Salt Production
- Claims of Most Individual Agarias to LRK Refused

Livelihood
Conservation
The migration of Agarias to work in industries and agricultural fields outside their villages as a measure to sustain their families is leading to a further decline in the social capital. While there has been no change in the human capital vertex of the pentagon, the efforts by government and NGOs to improve the lives of Agarias has ensured an elongation of the physical capital vertex. The changes in the asset pentagon of Agarias of LRK are shown in Figure 9.3.

Figure 9.3: Changes in the Livelihood Asset Pentagon of Agarias of LRK

This study has been able to capture the diverse voices emanating from the community due to changes in their livelihood assets. It has also brought to fore the varied strategies adopted by Agarias to mitigate their vulnerabilities and protect their livelihood in response to the emergent treats. The existence of divergent voices in the community contradicts the views of NGO professionals and respondents of the first group who were interviewed in the initial stage of fieldwork regarding the unified stance embraced by Agarias to assert their rights over LRK. The availability of brine at a suitable depth in LRK for inland salt production has emerged as the major determinant of the commitment among Agarias across different groups and age categories to struggle for their rights inside the Rann. As shown in Figure 9.4, most respondents in all the three groups are committed to continue inland salt production till the availability of brine and carry on their efforts against the attempts to deny them access to the Rann. One set of discordant voices is represented by some respondents of the first and second groups and most youth of the community.
INITIAL STAGE OF FIELDWORK

1st GROUP
Continue Inland Salt Production in LRK

1st GROUP
Struggle for the Right to Produce Salt in LRK

COMPLETION OF FIELD WORK

Most Respondents in (1st, 2nd & 3rd) Groups
Continue Inland Salt Production till Brine Available

Struggle for the Right to Produce Salt in LRK

Most Youth and Some Respondents in (2nd & 3rd) Groups
Continue Inland Salt Production till Brine Available and Looking for other Livelihood

Support the Struggle for the Right to Produce Salt in LRK

Few Youth and Respondents in (2nd & 3rd) Groups
Discontinue Inland Salt Production from Next Season and Migrate

Futile to Struggle for the Right to Produce Salt in LRK

Note: **
1st Group: Agarias aware of the debate
2nd Group: Agarias with some idea about the debate
3rd Group: Agarias unaware of the debate

Figure 9.4: Position of Agarias in the Livelihood and Conservation Debate

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While they are willing to continue inland salt production till the availability of brine, they are also looking for other livelihood opportunities away from their villages. These respondents only extend their support to the efforts of the members of their community struggling to ensure that Agarias are not stopped from producing salt inside the Rann. Finally, the stance taken by few respondents of the second and third categories and some youth represents the other set of conflicting voices within the community. They have decided to migrate to work in coastal areas to produce marine salt, in agricultural lands in Dhrangadhra or in factories in the nearby cities. As opposed to the views expressed by other respondents on the efforts of Agarias to protect their natural resource dependent livelihood, they hold the opinion that the struggle is futile and everyone should look for new avenues of livelihood.

Interactions with stakeholders involved in this debate reveal an on-going tussle amongst themselves to justify their respective positions in this debate. Conservationists hold Agarias responsible for the loss of biodiversity in LRK. Agarias and NGO professionals working with them refute these claims and highlight the manner in which conservation initiatives have been forced upon the community without taking into consideration their impact on the lives of thousands of families who have been for centuries dependent on the Rann. Agarias also stand divided on the issue. Respondents of the first group blame those in other groups of not joining hands to oppose the efforts of the conservationists. These respondents in turn accuse the first group of putting their individual interests above the concerns of the community. The inability to put up a unified resistance has also been a major cause of exploitation of the community over the years. Agarias are dependent on NGOs working with them for devising strategies to protect their livelihood. There are also attempts by some Agarias to organise the community around issues related to their livelihood without the assistance of NGOs. It has to be pointed out that these efforts are still in their nascent stage. In addition to the NGO professionals, the educated members of the Chunvalia Koli community also represent the Agarias. While most respondents initially asked the researcher to meet these persons, the same respondents later expressed their resentment against attempts by the educated few to hog the media limelight.
The educated members of their community have also been criticised for aligning with forces exploiting Agarias. Excluding the traders themselves, respondents across all categories hold the traders responsible for the miserable plight of Agarias. The findings of this study emphasise upon the need to consider the complex relationship between the community and other stakeholders for the success of community organisation initiatives intended to reduce the livelihood vulnerabilities induced by the creation of a protected area.

Threatened by the conservation initiatives, Agarias have adopted various strategies to protect their traditional livelihood. They emphasise upon the centuries old peaceful coexistence between their community and the Rann, their possession of traditional knowledge and the manner in which their community has been historically exploited. They highlight the vulnerabilities inherent in their livelihood of inland salt production. Reference to the bleak future of inland salt trade is also made by Agarias to allude to their state of increased vulnerability. NGO professionals argue that in the present situation of heightened livelihood insecurity, efforts should be directed towards ensuring that Agarias can continue their traditional practice of salt making without disturbing their harmonious relationship with the Rann and its biodiversity.

Agarias are also quick in labeling other members from within their community and people from outside their community as either ‘friends’ supporting their cause or ‘foes’ hand in glove with the forces desirous of preventing them from undertaking salt production inside the Rann. The allegations leveled by Agarias and conservationists against each other owing to the ongoing conflict have further created an atmosphere of animosity and mistrust in the villages surrounding the Rann. The emergence of fissures in the strong bonds among members of different communities dependent on the Rann for their livelihood is another dimension of this conflict. It has to be added that unless timely interventions are introduced, the conservation practices of Agarias, which are enmeshed in the relationship shared by them with the Rann may weather away.
9.2. Park and People: An Emerging Area for Social Work Practice

The study reiterates the argument that the issue of livelihood of communities living near protected areas cannot be dissociated from the efforts to conserve the biodiversity of the area. Agarias are inextricably linked to their Rann and their livelihood activity of inland salt production does not directly affect the flora and fauna of the Rann. The study also reveals that under the sweeping influence of local and global changes, the aspirations of Agarias, particularly the youth are changing. They are drawn towards newer and seemingly more secure livelihood opportunities outside their villages. Madhusudan and Raman (2003) have noted that the ‘notion of stasis’ which underlines that communities within wildlife reserves have mere subsistence needs and have no desire similar to the ‘urban omnivore’ stands on a shaky pedestal (p.53). It also cannot be denied that the commercial exploitation of Rann for the production of salt is likely to threaten its fragile ecosystem. Thus, it can be argued that a combination of strategies directed towards the diversification of the livelihood portfolio of Agarias and inclusion of their voices in conservation initiatives have to be undertaken in order to reduce distortion in their livelihood assets pentagon and simultaneously protect the biodiversity of the area.

The strategy to protect the biodiversity of LRK by entirely fencing it from human activities is not viable as it completely disregards the actual and potential role played by Agarias in conservation. In view of the complete dependence of the community on the Rann for their livelihood and the prevailing socio-political conditions, attempts to enforce initiatives of complete exclusion of people from the protected area may result in an escalation of the conflict. This may also lead to a negative impact on the fragile ecosystem of LRK and negate the success achieved in increasing the number of endangered wild asses. As stated by Conte (2007), the worldwide application of the idea of unspoiled nature leading to the creation of protected areas is tied to the American legacy of wilderness designation and protection. He has added that globally the ideology has merged with biology, colonial legacy and authoritarian rule of post-colonial states to ‘produce landscapes divided by conflict’ (p.224). He has further opined that the exclusion of local people from protected areas points towards the continuation of science aided dominance of western imperialism.
Among the approaches discussed by Salafsky and Wollenberg (2000) to integrate the demands of livelihood and conservation, the findings of this study support the implementation of the strategy to directly link livelihoods of the community with conservation initiatives. According to them, ‘livelihoods drive conservation’ in this strategy (p.1425). It further recognises the role of local people in conserving biodiversity. Accordingly, this study proposes a four phased social work intervention plan that can mitigate the conflict between different stakeholders in LRK. The plan draws from the emphasis laid by West and Brockington (2006) on the need to focus on both social as well as biological complexities while establishing a protected area. Based on the suggestions offered by Mombeshora and Le Bel (2009) for solutions to park and people conflicts, the plan lays stress on designing interventions rooted in the local culture and aims at addressing the livelihood needs of the community. Taking into consideration the anthropogenic pressures on the fragile ecosystem of the area and the precarious livelihoods of Agarias, it also intends to reduce the cost of conservation initiatives borne by local communities and bring to fore the voices of Agarias and other communities (Figure 9.6).

Assessment, organisation, analysis and intervention constitute the four phases of this plan. The first three phases of the plan can be adopted for most communities in conflict with protected areas. The intervention phase will vary depending on the outcomes of the first three phases. Assessment phase will commence with the determination of the stage of livelihood and conservation conflict. This will be based on the legal position of the protected area, status of implementation of the legislative provisions for creation and maintenance of protected areas and execution of the legislations protecting the rights of the local people in and around the protected areas. This will be followed by an assessment of the awareness among the community about the conservation initiatives and their legal rights. Simultaneously, a social impact assessment and an ecological assessment shall be undertaken. Social impact assessment will be undertaken with the objectives of identifying the various stakeholders in the conflict, their relationship with each other, dependence of their livelihood on the protected area, impact of the conservation initiatives on their livelihood, their conservation values and alternative livelihood opportunities for them.
ASSESSMENT OF STAGE IN LIVELIHOOD & CONSERVATION CONFLICT

- Awareness Assessment
- Social Impact Assessment
- Ecological Assessment

RANN AGARIA MANDALI

Change in Livelihood Pentagon

Transforming Structures & Processes

Vulnerability Context

Challenges to Conservation

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

INTERVENTION PLAN

- Participation, Dialogue & Negotiation

Alternative Livelihood
- Creation of Salt Zones
- Support for Inland Salt

Media Advocacy
- Eco-tourism
- Sensitisation Drive

Figure 9.5: Social Intervention Plan for Livelihood and Conservation Debate
Ecological assessment will focus on studying the abundance and distribution of flora and fauna, land use and habitat utilisation pattern and the impact of livelihood activities on the ecology of the protected area. The social worker will play a key role in conducting the assessments along with researchers from disciplines like human ecology and conservation biology.

Based on the assessment phase, a platform will be created for all stakeholders to come and share their views and concerns. In LRK, the social worker can facilitate the creation of the Rann Agaria Mandali (RAM). In addition to the Agarias, members of organisations working with them, conservationists, local administrators and officials of government departments, RAM will have women and elderly representatives from among the Agarias, members of other communities, leading academicians from science and social sciences working on the park and people issue. The social worker will ensure that every member of Ram can express oneself without fear and that those in power do not force their views on the weaker sections. In the next phase of the plan, RAM will analyse findings of the assessment phase. The social worker will also act as a facilitator for this phase. RAM will at the outset ascertain whether voices of all stakeholders have been incorporated in the assessment phase. It will have the powers to initiate action to fill any identified gaps. The objectives of the analysis will be to ascertain the following:

a. Change in the Livelihood Pentagon of Local Communities;
b. Vulnerability Context;
c. Transforming Structures & Processes;
d. Challenges to Conservation.

The intervention phase will stem out from the above three phases. In the context of communities like Agarias of LRK, interventions will take into consideration the historic marginality of these communities with respect to their lives and livelihood. It has to be reiterated that the inclusion of Agarias in activities associated with the protected area is essential for the success of any present or future conservation initiatives. Inclusion will require conservationists to renounce the top-down model and show respect for the traditional knowledge possessed by the community. MacDonald (2003) has noted that ignoring the beliefs, values and practices of local communities will restrict the idea of
conservation. Ulloa et al. (2004) through the case of Embera community in Utría National Natural Park in Columbia have also pointed out that the integration of the approach adopted by the local community to conserve wildlife with the scientific approach for successful management of wildlife will ensure the maintenance of cultural continuity of the community and strengthen its involvement in participatory processes. Underlining the difficulty in this integration of ‘indigenous and western scientific ways of knowing and managing wildlife’, Nakashima (1993), has noted that both the systems of knowledge should get equivalent consideration if local people and state managers are to be equal partners in the conservation efforts (p.99).

In the context of Agarias of LRK, RAM will formulate, implement, monitor and evaluate the interventions in close coordination with local organisations. The interventions can include the creation of salt zones inside LRK, as suggested by GEER. This is based on the argument of De Fries et al. (2010) that the conflict between conservation goals and livelihood needs of local people as witnessed in the protected areas of Asia due to their location in areas of high densities of human populations with population dependent on local resources can be mitigated through the creation of a ‘zone of interaction’ (p.2871). They have reasoned that the creation of such an area will balance human needs and conservation goals in the larger landscape.

Taking into account the depletion of brine in LRK, RAM can implement programmes specifically designed and aimed at promoting alternative livelihood options for Agarias as discussed earlier. As stressed by Nagendra et al. (2006), encouraging and involving local residents living both inside and outside the boundaries of protected area in initiatives undertaken to promote alternative profitable methods of income generation furthers the cause of conservation. RAM can ensure that measures to promote eco-tourism in the area involve members of the local community. Based on the work of Walpole and Thouless (2005) it can be stated that Agarias should gain net profit from tourism initiatives in the area and that the linkages between the receipt of benefits from tourism and the need to conserve the fragile eco-system should be maintained. The manner in which Guerande, a town in France famous for its salt marshes and grey salt has been linked with tourism projects shows that similar ventures for the inland salt trade can also be undertaken in LRK.
For the fulfillment of the objectives of the plan, RAM will advocate for support to inland salt making and directly link the Agarias to the markets for salt and its by-products to reduce their dependency on traders and middlemen. It will further initiate action to spread awareness among local communities about their rights to the protected area, to document the traditional knowledge of local communities and sensitise conservationists about the critical role of these communities in protecting the biodiversity of LRK. It view of the success of the radio programme in spreading information among Agarias regarding the need to file their claims to the Rann, media based advocacy through initiatives like community radio emerges as an important mechanism to spread awareness that can reduce the cost of conservation borne by Agarias.

The reduction of cost can lead to the achievement of the ‘win-win situation’ (p.136) proposed by Higgins-Zogib et al. (2010). Underlining their viewpoint that the success of the protected area strategy is contingent on the reduction of poverty among people living in and around the protected area, the three outcome situations; ‘win’, ‘lose’ and ‘no-change’ of the impact of conservation initiatives on biodiversity and poor people have been arranged in a 3x3 grid by them. These outcomes are combined to yield nine distinct categories. In contrast to the ‘win-lose’ situation, as proposed in LRK where due to strict management plans, local people who have been traditionally dependent on the place are also forbidden from entering the protected area, in the ‘win-win situation’ situation, local people are engaged as active managers of the protected area and both biodiversity and people eventually emerge as winners. As noted by Berkes (2008),

> ‘Conservation programs often need to encompass a broader view of the role of local people of the area, their knowledge and interests, and their social and economic needs’ (p.40).

Describing a previously unexplored site for social work research and practice i.e. ‘Park and People Conflict’, this study opens up new avenues for social workers. Social workers can conduct further research to explore various facets of the conflict in detail. Exploring the idea of a nation through the national parks across India, the role of voluntary organisations working with communities caught in this conflict and the assessment of community-based conservation initiatives from a social work perspective are some suggestive areas for future research. This study can be included as a case study in the curriculum for ‘Ecology and Social Work’ and ‘Occupational
Social Work’. For the students of ‘Ecology and Social Work’, the study will provide an understanding of the conflict between conservation initiatives driven by western science and local livelihoods. It will also help them gain knowledge about issues involved in organising communities caught in such conflicts. Involving the issues of livelihood, unorganised sector, occupational hazards, privatisation and informalisation of work, the case of Agarias of LRK will enable students of ‘Occupational Social Work’ to grasp several concepts of the subject. In view of the findings regarding the lack of knowledge among NGO workers about issues surrounding the livelihood and conservation debate, this study recommends a certificate programme in ‘Livelihood and Conservation’, targeted to enable the field practitioners to work efficiently in such situations. Due to the emphasis on the involvement of local communities in conservation initiatives, livelihood and conservation is an emerging area of employment for social workers. The intervention plan detailed in this study highlights the pivotal role of a social worker in ameliorating the lives of Agarias and members of other communities caught between an unsatisfactory past and an uncertain future.

9.3. As the Sun Sets over Little Rann of Kachchh

‘… Ponabhai’s nineteen year old youngest son, Rameshbhai had arrived from Valsad where he worked in a factory manufacturing car accessories. Ramesh asked me to join him for a ride to the centre of the Rann on his Rajdoot. After almost an hour, he stopped his bike in the centre of nowhere and claimed that it was the best spot to view the sunset. He was right; it was one of the most spectacular sunsets I had ever seen. As the sun went down the horizon, Ramesh told me that he hated the city, the factory and the people there. He wanted to come back to his village and wished he could enjoy the sunset every day. He added that inspite of his longing to stay in the Rann with his family; he will have to return to the city, as the fate of inland salt making is uncertain. After a long silence he asked me, vijaybhai, what do you think will happen to the Agarias? Ramesh did not wait to listen to my answer; it seemed he was in a hurry to return to the hut before it was too dark. It was also possible that he never wanted to listen to my answer, or he knew the answer too well to hear it from me again.

(Diary Entry, LRK, March 2011)